

My Place, Your Place: Thoughts for Parashat Terumah

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Angel for Shabbat: Parashat Teruma

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When you attend synagogue, do you usually sit in the same seat? Even in synagogues where there is no assigned seating, do you find that you and almost everyone else ends up in their usual places? Why?

Jewish tradition refers to the importance of a *makom kavua*, a fixed location where we say our prayers. Ancient wisdom recognized that we need to achieve a comfort level when we come before God. Sitting in the same place provides a sense of continuity and solace. It generates a Pavlovian feeling: when we sit in this spot, our minds and souls are immediately tuned in to prayer. Even when we pray at home, halakha urges us to have a *makom kavua*, a designated place for prayer.

But isn't God everywhere? Isaiah envisioned God's glory as permeating all the land, *melo khol ha'arets kevodo*. We can—and often do—feel the Divine Presence everywhere we go.

However, Ezekiel's vision reminds us that God's glory can seem very remote; we bless God *mimekomo*, from God's place i.e. in the heavenly spheres. In fact, our spiritual lives are subject to fluctuations—sometimes feeling that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves; but sometimes feeling that God is far removed from us.

Jewish tradition, well-aware of our spiritual ups and downs, proposes that we have a *makom kavua*, a designated place where we can relate to the Almighty in our own special space. Whether we are on a spiritual high or on a depressing low, when we pray from our *makom kavua* we are more likely to find spiritual balance.

This week's Torah reading tells of the construction of the Mishkan, the sanctuary of the Israelites, during their journey in the wilderness. The Mishkan was the forerunner of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. Synagogues are the successors of the ancient Temples. Why did God command the construction of the Mishkan? Surely God's glory fills the universe and cannot be limited to one building. The answer: God does not need a Mishkan/Temples/Synagogues: We do! Understanding human nature, God provided a *makom kavua*, a designated sacred space, so that we can better experience the presence of the Divine.

It has often been pointed out that when God instructed the Israelites to build the Mishkan, it was so that God will dwell among the people. The Mishkan/Temples/Synagogues are designated spaces where people can more readily sense God's presence.

The next time you are in synagogue (and sitting in your own spot!), take a few moments to reflect on the privilege of being in the presence of God. Your *makom kavua* is a physical place ...and a spiritual launching pad.